Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee:	Mrs. Mildred Pitts Walter
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Interviewer:	Dr. David P. Cline
Videographer:	John Bishop
Length:	01:31:20

David Cline: The colors are great. That was a good choice. [Laughs]

John Bishop: That's a nice one. And the velvet, you know, absorbs the light so you just get the color coming through.

Mildred Pitts Walter: Oh, great. [Clears throat]

JB: Okay, David. Do you want to do the slate?

DC: Okay. So, what I'll do to start is just introduce who we are, and then we'll start right into the conversation.

MW: Good.

DC: If that's good, okay? This is David Cline for the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress Civil Rights History Project. Today is March the first, 2013, and I'm in San Mateo, California. And today we have the pleasure of speaking with Mildred Pitts Walter. Good afternoon!

MW: Good afternoon.

DC: Thank you so much for participating in this project. We really, really appreciate it.

MW: Thank you for inviting me to participate.

DC: So, we will—we're gonna—I'm on—just for the record, I'm on Channel 2. Mrs. Walter is on Channel 1. Okay. And we'll just start right into it.

MW: Alright.

DC: Okay. So, what I'd like to do, if we could just start, if you could tell me a little bit about where you were raised and your family.

MW: I was born in Louisiana in 1922. And my mother and father were together for a while. And when Long-Bell Lumber Company left Louisiana, my father was working with them in Mississippi, and my mother was still in Louisiana. So, I grew up in a place called DeRidder, Louisiana, between Lake Charles and Shreveport, in southwest Louisiana.

I went to—finished Beauregard Parish High School, where the only new book I ever had was the *History of the Negro* by Carter G. Woodson. All the other books we had had pages torn out or marked up, but—

DC: Can you describe—I'd love to hear a description of the school itself and your teachers, what kind of teachers you had.

MW: Well, we were an all-black school, and the school was finally a pretty nice building. Before we had the new school, we were in churches and places. And finally, we had a school with a principal who could do electricity and heat, and so we got lights, rather than lamps. And this was all in the '30s and '40s. And all of our teachers were African American, or at that time, we were Negroes. We all were Negroes. And they were really wonderful teachers, and they

helped us to know that we were not inferior. And we took seriously Carter G. Woodson's history that told us about Africa and the nice things about Africa.

And, of course, we had the church. The church was very important, because the ministers and the leaders insisted that we hold our heads high, and we took learning seriously, and whatever we did, do it with an attitude of excellence, and to walk and approach those who hated us with humility, for humility could not be humiliated. And we learned that and became really strong.

And I made goals and made choices. I worked from the time I was seven. I worked taking care of a little white girl for a while, and then, I worked in a beauty shop, cleaning the beauty shop, and I worked in homes, cleaning homes and—

DC: While also going to school?

MW: While going to high school, um-hmm. And met some very interesting white people who seemed to appreciate the fact that I wanted not to just do that always. [0:05:00]

DC: Hmm, um-hmm.

MW: And there was one woman who came—Camp Polk was in Leesville not far from us. And that was time during World War II, and these soldiers were there, and their wives came. And one woman came from Ohio, and she hired me to come and help her. She insisted that I sit at the table and eat with her, and I—I just felt—you know. But she was very nice about it. We sat, and she talked. And I was a sophomore in college, and she gave me magazines to read and insisted—she would talk about what we had read. And when she left, she said to me that I was the only person that she felt comfortable with in that place.

DC: Interesting. Hmm.

MW: [Laughs] I wish I could remember her name.

DC: Where was she from initially?

MW: She was from somewhere in Ohio.

DC: Okay.

MW: Um-hmm.

DC: Yeah, yeah.

MW: And I'll tell you later how I learned why the majority of Southerners didn't let us eat together. [Laughs] But she insisted on my doing that.

Well, I went from there to Southern University in Scotlandville, Louisiana. And I finished Southern—well, while I was there, of course, I came in contact with very interesting leaders: Mordecai Johnson, W. E. B. Du Bois. All of them came and talked to us and inspired us.

[Clears throat] And when I left there in 1944, I knew that I couldn't—well, before that, in my senior year, I went up into the state of Washington, Longview, Washington. And I worked in the shipyards in Vancouver, Washington, to earn—

DC: [Laughs] So, how did you end up—how did you end up there, doing that kind of work?

MW: My sister had gone there. [Clears throat] Her husband had moved there, oh, back in the '30s. And she lived in Longview, Washington, and I went there to work in the shipyards to earn enough money to finish, to finish Southern.

DC: Right.

MW: And I had had a lot of experience in personnel, working with the dean of women, so I applied for a job in personnel at the shipyards. And they laughed at me. It was [laughs] very highly discriminating, even there, during that time of the war.

DC: So, what job did you end up doing?

MW: I ended up cleaning ships, working in gyro rooms and cleaning ships. And my manager, my supervisor, felt, she said, "This is not the kind of work for you." And she tried, but nothing happened.

DC: Um-hmm. You often hear about African American women with jobs during the war, the "last hired, first fired."

MW: Right!

DC: What kind of experience did you have?

MW: Well, I only wanted to be there for a while. But the women who worked with me, both black and white, they had children, and we were on the graveyard shift. So, [laughs] I came in well-rested, and they would fall asleep. [Laughs] And I would wake them when the supervisor was coming, and they appreciated that.

DC: Um-hmm. So, you were working alongside white women, as well as black women?

MW: Yeah, white women and black women, yes, uh-huh.

DC: And how was that? What was that experience like?

MW: Well, it was a nice experience. They knew that I was a college student. And they felt that, you know, I shouldn't be there and should go back as soon as I could. And I did. I went back and graduated at Southern. And when I graduated, with my mother's blessings, I went to L.A. [Los Angeles].

DC: Um-hmm. Let me just ask again about Washington. Was that really your first time outside of the South? [0:10:00]

MW: That was my first time out of the South, um-hmm.

DC: And did that do anything to you, as far as seeing how things were in another part of the country?

MW: Yes. Yes, African Americans were segregated in the little town. They all lived together. They went to the same church. And—but they could go to an integrated school. But they lived in a segregated neighborhood. But they were very much separated. They didn't—the kids didn't interchange visits or anything like that, even there, at that time.

DC: Um-hmm. Did that surprise you? Or did it seem expected, do you think, at that time for you?

MW: Well, I just expected that, [laughs] you know. I didn't know. I didn't know what the difference should have—well, I felt that it should have been different. But, especially working, I thought that I would be able to work, do something different than cleaning ships. But I was very lucky that they were finished and didn't have all of that stuff that caused lung problems.

JB: Carbon tetrachloride.

MW: Yes, um-hmm. I was very lucky. Because what we did, we prepared the ships for sailing, you know, the first voyage. The first voyage trip, we prepared them for that. And, of course, we never went on a voyage. [Laughs]

DC: [Laughs] Right. Very interesting.

MW: But I—I saw the ocean for the first time. We went to the Pacific Ocean, and I was awed! I thought, "This must be all the water in the world!" [Laughter] And it was such a nice experience. Portland, Oregon, was a very beautiful city, lots of roses. It's the town of roses. My brother-in-law would take me to places so that we could see. Mount—oh, that mountain that just had the terrible—

JB: Mount Saint Helen?

MW: Mount Saint Helen! Was in our back—we could see it from our backdoor. And it had snow then, snow on Mount St. Helen all year round.

JB: It looks different now.

DC: [Laughs]

MW: I bet! After that volcanic action. Yes.

DC: [Coughs] So—

JB: Let's pause a second, please.

DC: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back on.

DC: Okay. So, you graduated, and you were saying, and then decided to move to Los Angeles.

MW: Yes. [Clears throat] I applied for—well, after having worked in Washington, I knew that I did not have to work for the amount of money that they were paying in Louisiana for teachers. And that was the only—I could have gone to work at Camp Polk in the laundry or something like that, but those were the only jobs for college graduates in Louisiana at that time. You were either a teacher or a maintenance person.

So, I applied for a job in Shreveport. They wanted me to teach high school English and do the library for fifty dollars a month. And I thought, "No." And I decided that—and my mother—my mother was a very smart woman. And she said, "When you go to college, they wash you down, and you change, and you don't fit in the place." And I didn't understand what she was saying. I didn't understand what she was saying, but she knew that at that time, they taught us [0:15:00] in these places very differently. And we felt that—we spoke correct English, and we didn't use the dialect.

DC: Um-hmm. Were there others in your family who had gone to college?

MW: Not at that time. I was the youngest and the first.

DC: And the first.

MW: Um-hmm.

DC: How many siblings do you have?

MW: There were seven of us. I had five sisters and one brother. All of that is in that—

DC: Okay, great.

MW: But she gave me her blessing and was very happy that I wanted to achieve. But now, when I am a mother and as old as I am, I understand what she was saying, and how that can make a difference with your parents, especially. She had wanted me to follow in her footsteps being a midwife and a healer, and I didn't want that.

DC: Um-hmm. So, it's a bit bittersweet?

MW: Yes.

DC: Yeah.

MW: She had wanted to teach me her methods. She did a—she had a cure for pneumonia before penicillin. And it *was* penicillin, but we didn't know that. It was definitely penicillin—when we would put the pigs on the floor, feed them grain, pure mash that would get in their hooves and mold. She would boil that, boil them, and give them—the doctor would say to people who had pneumonia, "I can't help you. Go see Mary." And she would cure them with that tea.

DC: Very interesting.

MW: She also used oyster shells, red-hot oyster shells in water, cool that, for kidney problems. And they know now that oyster shells have a special medicine that they use now to cure kidney infections. She was very—a very smart woman with very little formal education.

DC: How had she learned her art?

MW: I don't know. I really don't know how she had learned that. But her mother—she had a sister who was ten years old at the end of slavery. And she was born in 1890-something. So, she probably knew how to go and find the herbs and plants, and she could do that. She could go and find plants and knew these plants that could serve as a cure for certain things, and especially for women problems.

DC: Um-hmm. That's fascinating, yeah.

MW: Yeah.

DC: And so, your family saw you off to Los Angeles? [Laughs]

MW: Los Angeles, [clears throat] yes. And I went to Los Angeles. I knew—I went with a high school classmate who had a brother who was living on Skid Row. And we went and stayed in a hotel on 5th Street, [laughs] very iffy place in Los Angeles at that time. But a lot of people who were transients were there, and I went and stayed there a few days.

And then I met a woman on the bus. And I told her I had come, just come, to town and I thought there would be a YWCA for black women. There was not a YWCA there, and I didn't know what to do. So, she said, "Well, give me a—" she gave me her phone number, said, "If you want to—." Oh, these are my grandchildren! [0:20:00]

JB: You can come in.

MW: Oh, wow!

JB: [0:20:06]

MW: It's a video.

DC: It's a video, but we can just take a picture. [Laughter]

MW: Yes, uh-huh. This is [0:20:12], [0:20:15], and this is Earl Lloyd, III. Walter.

JB: And who are these people?

MW: These are my great-grandchildren!

JB: Great-grandchildren!

MW: Great-grands.

JB: Gosh, I've barely—

MW: She's eleven, and he's seven.

JB: I've barely got to have grandchildren.

MW: [Laughs] Well, I feel really blessed! These are my great-grands, um-hmm.

JB: Okay, well, thank you.

MW: Okay.

DC: Alright. Say hello to the American people! [Laughter]

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

MW: Now, we were in Los Angeles.

DC: Yeah, and if I could just ask you—I forgot to ask you what year that was when you first went.

MW: That was in 1944 when I went to Los Angeles.

DC: Great. And you were just saying you had met a woman on the bus.

MW: Yes. And what happened, I was sitting sort of in the back. And I saw this woman, and she looked very intelligent and very friendly. And I had been [clears throat] taught that we could trust certain people, and you can tell who you can trust. And I got up and went and sat beside her. And she introduced herself and told me a joke when I told her I had just come.

She said, "Oh, these people are coming in, coming into town." She said, "And one day, a lady was on the bus. And she sat beside a person, and this woman, who had just come in from the South, she was eating on the bus. And the lady said, 'We don't eat on the bus.' And she

asked the woman, 'How long you been here?' And the woman told her she had been there for many years. She said, 'Well, when I've been here long as you, I won't eat on the bus either!'" [Laughter]

And we had a good laugh. And I told her my problem, that I was on Skid Row and I didn't want to be there. And she gave me her phone and said, "Call me if you decide that is not where you want to be." And when I called her, she said I could come and live with her. And she had been there for many years and was well known in the community. And she introduced me to all of these nice people, to my sorority sisters, and so I was well underway. Um-hmm. And her name was Mozella Moore.

DC: Um-hmm.

MW: Um-hmm.

DC: Very interesting. And did you start looking for work then, as well?

MW: I found work right away. And I worked in—well, I applied for a teaching job. And, of course, there were no black teachers in Los Angeles at that time. There was one black high school teacher. And I was told that I would have to have a California credential, of course. So, I went back to Cal State, L.A., got a credential, and then I was hired as a teacher.

But first, before that, I was hired as a clerk with the Los Angeles City Schools as a—in the Classified Section. And the Classified Section included people who didn't have certificates. There were janitors and clerks, and so I worked as a clerk in the place where they gave the tests for classified employees. And that was very interesting.

And went back to school—well, I met my husband, and we got married. And I went back to school and got my credential. And then, I started teaching in elementary school.

DC: So, can you tell me—I want to ask about your teaching, but can you tell me about meeting your husband?

MW: Yes. One of my sorority sisters took me to a Methodist church. And I remember one evening we were having a meeting with young people, [0:25:00] and he walked in. And I said to her—he was such an intelligent-looking man—I said, "Who is that man?" And she said, "Oh, girl! He has lots of girlfriends! You don't want to get involved with him."

But we spoke, and I found out that he had also graduated from Southern. And I—you know, we met, and he became sort of interested, but not—it was not love at first sight, no. No, it wasn't that, because we both were mature. But we were friends. I remember one time I had to do a presentation at the church, and I didn't have a decent dress. And I asked him to loan me some money to get a hat and a dress, and he loaned me the money. And when I paid him back, he said, "Well, I wasn't worried because I knew you didn't want anybody to have anything on you, and you'd give me the money back!" [Laughter] And that's the kind of person he was.

DC: Right.

MW: I remember one time we had a meeting with the students from USC, and I made the spaghetti and fixed all the food and said the blessing and the prayer. And he was impressed, and then, we started seriously growing in love. And we married in 1947, um-hmm.

DC: And was he already involved with CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] at that time?

MW: Yes, he was involved with CORE and had been since 1942.

DC: Okay.

MW: And he was also involved with another organization called Drew, A. M. Drew, and they were doing—working against segregation in hotels and motels.

DC: Okay. Do you know what that stands for, DREW?

MW: Drew? That was a person's name.

DC: Oh, okay, A. M. Drew.

MW: It was not—it was just an organization started by that man.

DC: Okay.

MW: But he was also working with CORE at that time, but not very—it wasn't very much going on. But by 1960, by 1958, CORE was really doing a lot. We were doing stores, asking for fair employment, and banks, asking for fair employment. At that time, in our area that was predominantly black in Los Angeles, around Central Avenue and in that area, Central Los Angeles, banks, stores, and other businesses did not hire us *except* as maintenance people, janitors.

So, we picketed them and negotiated with them to hire young people who needed no more than a high school graduate to do what they were doing, you know, to become sales people and box boys. And we insisted that they [clears throat] train them for management, you know. And we were very successful with the grocery stores. The banks were very reluctant. But we picketed the banks and negotiated with them, and finally they hired tellers and started training people for management.

DC: Who were some of CORE's allies? I mean, I'm sort of interested in what kinds of people worked with you and who CORE worked with.

MW: We were interracial. When we went into—well, in 1959, Jesse Unruh, who was a representative, passed a bill making accommodations—[0:30:00] segregated accommodations illegal. So, we had both blacks and whites in CORE. And the ACLU, you know, we were friends with people in the ACLU and lawyers and that type of people.

And we would go out in our car with suitcases and [laughs] the children and go to motels and hotels and ask for a room and be denied. And then, the white couple would come after us and get a room. And so, we sued those people. We would bring suit against them. And there was a young lawyer who did cases for us pro bono, and we had success in suing them, and they would finally change.

Now, of course, I believe that any law that comes about isn't worth much until it has been tested. So, we set out to test that law and were successful in breaking down—I think we did it more quickly than it would have happened if we had not done the tests.

DC: Um-hmm. Can I ask you what drove you? What motivated you?

MW: Well, I guess I had always—we had always been taught to resist, but we couldn't act overtly. And we did that with just acting humbly and standing tall and facing these people without being subservient, you know, yet with humility. And that was instilled in us. And so, when I had the opportunity to act openly, it came natural. Just came natural to do this, because I knew it was wrong, the way that we were treated. And when I could do something to prevent it, it was just a normal thing to do.

DC: Um-hmm. So, jumping around just a little bit, when you started teaching, what year was that that you had your first actual teaching job?

MW: '55, 1955.

DC: '55. And at that point, how many African Americans were teaching in Los Angeles?

MW: There were quite a few.

DC: Okay.

MW: Um-hmm, yes. There were quite a few teachers.

DC: So, things had changed?

MW: Yes, things had changed a lot when I started teaching. Most of the teachers at my school were African Americans—young, very young teachers. And all of the children were African Americans; maybe one or two were not. And I can remember one time a little boy, a white boy, was there and he got into trouble somehow. And he was in the vice principal's office, and the vice principal said to him, "You don't have to be here! I will send you to any school you want to go! You don't have to be here!" He didn't know I was outside listening. And this kid, he left. He left. I don't know where he went.

DC: Interesting.

MW: But those are the kinds of things that—

DC: What was your reaction to that when you heard that?

MW: My reaction?

DC: Yeah.

MW: Well, I just felt that—I didn't say anything to him, because [laughing] he at one time told me that if I didn't like it here, I should go to another country. Because [laughs] I was—I was very active and I would put up black people on the wall for the children. Between Abraham Lincoln and George Washington on Presidents Day, I would put Frederick Douglass, with all his beard—

DC: Yeah.

MW: And tell the children about that. And I was active. I was demonstrating *then*, and they knew that. And, of course, I was wearing my hair [laughs] natural. Nobody else was, except, I guess, the singer—Abbey Lincoln, the actress, and—what was her name? That singer who did folk songs? It'll come to me. But we were the only three people that I knew who were doing this, and it was very disturbing to people for us to begin to do that.

DC: And what did it symbolize for you?

MW: For me?

DC: Yeah.

MW: Well, I had met—for the first time, I met people who had come from Africa, and we were friends. And this woman was so beautiful. And she had her hair short [0:35:00] and not pressed, just what we call nappy hair, and I thought how *beautiful* that was! And I decided I would cut my hair and wear it like that. And people wondered why I wanted to do that. They thought—I don't know—but that's—

DC: Yeah.

MW: Yeah. But I did it, and my husband was proud. And sometimes, I would go back and straighten it, and he would say—I would say, "Well, people do it," you know. He said, "But that's not your hair like that." And I took his word for it and have done it this way since the 1950s.

DC: Wow, yeah. So, you were putting up—I just love the image of you putting up Frederick Douglass on the wall.

MW: [Laughs] Yeah, with George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

DC: Yeah, yeah! And clearly, you know, trying to teach, put some black role models up for the students, you know.

MW: Right! Right. Right. And I did that. And I would put out brown paint, color for the children to paint themselves. And that was not popular either, because they didn't want to think of themselves as black and beautiful. But one of the most precious moments for me was one time a little girl came while I was teaching and said to me—she was crying, "Teacher, he called me black!" And I looked at her and I said, "But you are! You are black and you are *beautiful*!"

And a few days later, somebody called her black, and I heard her say, "Yes, I am! And I'm beautiful because Teacher told me so!" And that was a *precious* moment, precious. She said it just like, "I'm beautiful because Teacher told me so."

And sometimes they would come in, and I would walk in, and they would say, "Look at Teacher's hair! Look at Teacher's hair!" You know, punching one another, "Looks just like mine!"

DC: [Laughs]

MW: You know?

DC: Um-hmm.

MW: Um-hmm, made a difference with them.

DC: Yeah. So, can you tell us a little bit about how that led to your writing?

MW: Oh, yes. At that time, there were very few books that showed us in a positive image.

DC: Right.

MW: We had pictures of eating watermelon and red lips and all of that, you know, rings in the nose. Now, Du Bois and Langston Hughes had done some books for children, but there weren't many. And I knew a publisher in Los Angeles who did my book, *Lillie of Watts*. And I asked him to publish some books for my children, you know. And he said, "Write them! If you write them, I'll publish them." And I said, "No, I am not a writer."

And he insisted, and I wrote that book, and he published it. And it was reviewed by outstanding reviewers, and kind of [0:40:00] heady stuff to be a writer. But I soon learned [laughs] after a couple of times that it wasn't that easy and I got a lot of rejection slips.

And then one day, I met a young man at Scholastic, who had just graduated from Harvard. He was working there, and I had gone in to see a black editor at another place, and she sent me to see him. And I went to see him, and he took me—Harvard had just opened up its restaurant, its place for women to go and eat, and he took *me* to go there, and that was very nice. [Clears throat] And I told him about a book I wanted to write, and he said, "Write it." And I wrote a book called *The Liquid Trap*. And they thought maybe this was about alcohol [laughs], but it was about these sinkholes in Louisiana, sand traps, you know, where you get caught in the sand.

DC: Yeah!

MW: And I did that book, and he published it and gave it to—showed it to another editor there. And she introduced me to a young editor, Barbara Lalicki. And Barbara was young enough to take a risk with an African American writer, so she asked me to write a book. And I wrote *Ty's One-Man Band* for her, and that was the very first book on Reading Rainbow, *Ty's One-Man Band.*

DC: Oh, it was?

MW: Uh-huh.

DC: Wonderful!

MW: Uh-huh. And I stayed with her and wrote most of these books with Barbara.

DC: Were there many African Americans in publishing?

MW: Not editors.

DC: Not editors, right.

MW: Not publishing, no! And I think that is the problem. There are no editors who look at our work and can see—

DC: Can understand, right.

MW: And appreciate where we're coming from. There are some—of course, there are white editors who do, but there are no black editors in these major publishing houses, not many.

DC: Yeah, even now.

MW: Not many. Not many. And, of course, now we have less than maybe one percent of all the books that are published written by and for black children, maybe less than one percent.

DC: Wow.

JB: Of all children's books?

MW: All children's books, um-hmm, yeah.

DC: But you were able to connect with some people that understood this, this vision.

MW: Oh, yes! Barbara appreciated what I was doing and had—my first book was a book—not my first, but *My Mama Needs Me* was a book about a little boy whose mother had a new baby, and he was very worried that she didn't love him anymore. And he went that—she went through that with him, and he would go out, and people would want him to do things away from home. And he said, "I can't. My Mama needs me." He had to get back.

JB: I've read that one to my grandchildren.

MW: Oh, really!

JB: Could you just hold it up maybe?

MW: Let me see if I can find it.

JB: It's this one right here.

MW: Yes, yes, yes. This book was the one. At first, the illustrator made the characters white. And my editor showed it to me, and I said, "No way! *No way!*" This—I could not do that, because my purpose was to have our children see themselves, and I'm sure that's what most

black writers wanted, [0:45:00] for the children to see themselves and their families. And not only for black children, but for *all* children to see us as we are, you know, and to know who we are and see us as—now, there was one book early that—*The Snowy Day* by Jack Keats.

DC: My daughter's favorite book. [Laughs]

MW: Yes, you see? And that was very nice, one of the first.

DC: Yeah.

MW: He did that to show these children as normal and healthy and really children.

DC: Um-hmm, yep.

MW: And all of my books, though, have a choice, courage, and change. Every character has to make choices, and then they have to stand by the choice if it's a good one. And if they do, they will grow. They will change. And everyone has to do that, even in [laughs] *My Mama Needs Me*.

DC: Right.

MW: Yes.

DC: When you were still teaching, did you ever sort of field test the books with the kids that you were teaching and bring in your stories?

MW: No. I went around the country with books. I wasn't teaching then.

DC: Okay.

MW: I was writing and consulting.

DC: Okay.

MW: But I would go to schools across the nation and talk to children and read my books and got wonderful letters from children, thanking me and telling me how much they enjoyed knowing the characters. Um-hmm. So, that was quite a pleasant experience to do the books.

DC: Right.

MW: And we won some interesting prizes, Coretta Scott King Award for *Justin and the Best Biscuits*, and—

JB: We might as well take a plug for these books while we're at it.

DC: [Laughs]

MW: Oh, yeah. This one won the Coretta Scott King Award for the best book. And this one won the Christopher, the Catholic Christopher Award, *Mississippi*—no, not this one. This one won Jane Addams notable book. And this one, Coretta Scott King—*Mississippi Challenge*—notable book, and the Christopher Best Book Award.

DC: Can you talk a little bit about that book, which—?

MW: This book?

DC: Maybe has a little bit of a, you know, targeted maybe a little bit older audience?

MW: Yes, this is for young adults. And this also is for young adults.

DC: Yeah.

MW: This one is about slavery during the Revolutionary War, and Elizabeth Freeman winning her freedom in Massachusetts through the Massachusetts Constitution. And this one is for young adults about the 1964 and '68 Mississippi Challenge, and all about Mississippi and how the people in Mississippi had struggled since the beginning of time to free themselves. And finally, in 1964, they went to the Democratic National Convention. And Fannie Lou Hamer, with President Johnson and all of them, and she had an opportunity to say to them, "We didn't come here to just say, do nothing. We came to take our seats." And President Johnson promised that they would have the time.

And then, they went back and did all of that legal work to make possible the seating of their delegates and, of course, I wrote a piece about that for the *Big Book of Peace*, which said, "There can be [0:50:00] no peace without justice," and how they went to Washington and stood waiting for the Congress to decide whether they would seat them or the white delegation. They lost that, but they won. They won, in spite of the fact that they were not seated. And then, they came back and did the work that made it possible for the Voting Rights Act to be passed. And we're really concerned *today* that the right to vote is in danger, here in the 21st century.

DC: Yeah. What kind of work do you hope that your writing does?

MW: Well, I hope that it tells children, black and white, all children, that they can make a difference. And all of my books point that out, that you do what you feel is right.

For instance, this book, *Alec's Primer*, this young boy was forced to read by a white girl in Virginia. And she told him he could go up to Connecticut—I think it was Connecticut—and he would be free. But he knew better, and his mother told him that he must not read, because he was a slave and he could be sold away from her. But she insisted, and this girl made him read.

And one day—he got very interested in reading—and one day, the grandmother caught him reading. And she tried to take the book away from him; it was a primer. He wouldn't give it up, and she hit him in the face with her riding crop. He still wouldn't give it up. And his children have that primer in Connecticut.

So, these are the kinds of things that I try to show children—not tell them, but show them, that you make choices. And you must, if it is a good choice—and a good choice is what is good for all living things, not just for you, but for all living things—when you know that is a good choice, then you have courage. And courage will help you to stick with that thing, and you

will change. You will grow. And all of my characters show that. And I believe that wholeheartedly: that courage will give us that kind of stick-to-itiveness to let us do what is right.

And that is why I was able to do the kinds of things that I did, like march beside Nazis, go to jail, take that risk. Because that's what making the choice is: Choosing is a risk. I don't want to sound preachy. [Laughs]

DC: No! No! Not at all.

JB: You can preach! [Laughter]

MW: But it is. That's what choosing is. It's taking risks. And when you risk, if you have the *courage*, because courage is that kind of thing that comes from being able to listen, listen to your heart—not that romantic thing—it's that inner spirit that guides you to do what is right, and you will learn how to go forward or step back at the right moment. And when you learn that, then you can grow. You will grow. You will change. And as Lillian Smith used to say, "You won't have status. [0:55:00] You'll have stature."

DC: [Laughs] Yeah.

MW: Um-hmm.

JB: Yeah.

MW: Um-hmm.

DC: So, we've talked about your childhood and then your work in Los Angeles and with CORE and teaching and the books.

MW: Um-hmm.

DC: How do *you* see all these things connected?

MW: Well, I did book reviews for the *Los Angeles Times* when Johnson made available for them to bring out more material for multicultural understanding. And so, I read all of those

old books that came back from Du Bois and from—and I was able to do—oh, names are there and I can't call them—the guy who was in prison in South Africa.

JB: Mandela.

DC: Mandela.

MW: Mandela!

DC: Yeah.

MW: Mandela's book, *I Will Still Be Moved* [Note: *I Will Still Be Moved: Reports from South Africa,* edited by Marion Friedmann]. And I reviewed that book for the *Los Angeles Times*, and all of Du Bois's books and James Baldwin's book—well, I didn't review James Baldwin's book. James Baldwin came to speak for us at CORE, and he had just written that book that was—oh, uh, um—

DC: *Go Tell It On the Mountain*?

MW: No, no.

DC: No?

MW: Not that one. It was the one that talked about Malcolm X. Oh, I know the book. But, anyway, he had just written that book, and the editor at Los Angeles reviewed it, and I rebutted his—for CORE—

DC: Right.

MW: And I rebutted his review. And he had said that Baldwin was a bigot in writing this book. What is that book? But, anyway, I proved from Baldwin's *words* that he was not. Because if he—I disagreed with some things with Baldwin, but not—I knew he was not a bigot, because at the end of his book, he said, "If *we*, the few that we are, can bring about peace, we can save

this nation. We can work to save this nation and give it justice." And after I did that rebuttal, he printed it and he asked me to review books.

DC: [Laughs] Yeah! Great.

MW: [Laughs]

DC: Great.

MW: And reviewing books, I decided that's not for me. I need to write. I need to write books, not just talk about or criticize other people's work. Let me try to do something, too. Um-hmm. So, but I will tell you some exciting moments in my life that I feel—

JB: Well, let's hold on for just—

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

MW: Okay. I marched in housing tracts in Los Angeles. And we—they were building houses in areas near where a lot of black people lived, and they wouldn't sell them to us. They wouldn't sell us those houses. So, we picketed them. And I can remember one Saturday we were picketing at a place in what is now Carson, California. And everything was going well. We had a big line, good line, and there was a Jewish person, Herbert, who had been in a concentration camp in Germany, and he was marching with us. He had been very active in CORE; he went on the Freedom Rides.

And, oh, soon, the police came, and they came and stood across the street, watching us. And, of course, they always brought tension. But after a while, the tension eased with the police. [1:00:00] And then, about four cars drove up, full of white men dressed like Nazis. They had on Nazi uniforms, including the swastika. And they had on their signs, their sticks were so big that

they could have damaged us with their placards. And their placards read, "Ovens too good for niggers," "Niggers, go back to the trees," "You monkeys, go back to the trees."

And I saw Herbert and I was so—I got worried about him. And I wondered if these people would make us lose our stance and become violent, but we had been trained. And finally, I saw Herbert leave the line in a staggering way. And I wondered, you know. I was very outraged and I wondered if I shouldn't leave, too. But I stayed and I was questioning myself: "Why am I here? Why am I doing this? Why do I want people thinking that I want to live beside white people? Why am I here?"

And somebody started singing, "Oh, Freedom." This lone voice, "Oh, freedom over me. And before I be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free." And I thought, "Well, I'm not here because I want to live beside white people. I'm here because I want us to be able to decide where it is we want to live, and we can have the freedom to do that." And I lost my anger and I felt pleased with myself that I had stayed. And I was there with not self-assertiveness, but there, and was at peace, and was there a long time after the Nazis had gone home.

DC: Um-hmm.

MW: Um-hmm. And another time, I had been asked to go with a group of artists and writers and sculptors to Nigeria to the African Festival of Culture, where all people from the Diaspora were coming. And I was the only children's book writer, so I was able to make a presentation. And they were quite pleased that I had come, because they felt that they needed more children's books on the continent.

But, anyway, I stayed. After Nigeria, I went to Ghana and to other places, Cameroon and to Ghana, and looked around. And I felt in many instances, in Ghana especially, they looked at

me and they wanted to know, "Who is that woman?" These were some women in the market where I was and somebody said, "She's a Kikuyu. She's a Kikuyu woman." They said, "No, I don't think she's Kikuyu. She might be [1:04:31]." And at that time, I spoke to another lady who was not with them, and when they heard my voice, they said, "Oh, my God! She's a white woman!" Oh! So, you can imagine how I felt!

And it's amazing—I don't like to think of that, but I can remember one time when I was [1:05:00] a teenager. I was a freshman in college and walking down the street in Louisiana, and soldiers were out there, were there. And a white soldier called to his friends in the drugstore and said, "Hey! Come see this pretty nigger!" And, for some reason, I got that same feeling there, and I don't why, but when they said, "Oh, my God! She's a white woman!" She's not one of us. And that's what they were implying: She's not one of us.

So, I went—I knew a great poet there, Kofi Awoonor, and he was gracious to take me to Elmina, that castle. And we went to that, and I listened to the people—this young man talk about the people who had been in there. And he was like a person who had no—his voice was like people do in an ad on TV, you know, no way of connecting. And at that time, we walked up on the deck to see the guns and the "Door of No Return." And when we walked up there, here were these men in chains! And at first, I thought, "My God, I'm hallucinating!" Or something. It was a prison!

DC: Wow!

MW: At that time.

DC: Wow!

MW: It was a prison. But so many of us have gone there, they have—I understand that is no longer so. So, Kofi and I went and stood on—he wanted me to see those big guns that were

trained on the ships so that when the slaves were about to leave, there could be no interference. And we went on the Atlantic Ocean and walked on the beach, and I was looking up at those guns and listening to the sound of the ocean rolling up, and ocean waves always remind me of the blues, for some reason. And I stood there and I looked up at those guns and I thought, "I am not African and I am not American." We had not been allowed to carry the flag at the festival. "And I am not protected under the flag of my country." And I broke down and cried.

DC: Um.

MW: And Kofi said, "What is it with you Americans? Every one of you who come here, you do that." And I couldn't tell him why. But I knew that I'm not African, really, and I'm not American. But I have a heritage of Africa and I'm born in America, so I can take the best of both cultures and be who I am and become whole. I do not—I am not three-fifths of a person. And I thought that there: "I'm not three-fifths of a person," as the Constitution said. On the shores of Africa, I felt this! I am not a potential. I am. And my blackness is not a lack. It is. And I felt that I am unique, *unique,* neither one nor the other.

And I can understand why Africa does not really know us. It was too painful. We were brutally taken away, never heard of again! [1:10:00] Nobody ever returned. And the pain is so great you have to suppress that pain and forget. Forget! And now, we're going back, and they are beginning to see we are very much a part of them, very much.

And, of course, I came back thinking, "I'm unique," but [laughs] when I came back, I couldn't talk about that to anybody. They might think I'm being arrogant and not wanting to identify with my African heritage. And so, I didn't say—I didn't talk about it. But I figured not knowing—and I didn't know enough about Africa. Three months in Africa tells you nothing. I

didn't know enough, but what I *could* do, I could begin to find out more about my heritage and about my people, where they had come from, and I did.

My grandmother came from Guinea, and she was part of the French and ended up in Haiti. And from Haiti, after the Toussaint Louverture Revolution, ended up in Louisiana. And I can find out more and become fully whole. And I think I've done that. I have looked at African religions, looked at Christian religion, and philosophies and all of that, and I think I can see comparisons between Jesus and my people. And that is why we were able to turn the other cheek and walk the second mile. Yes. Yes.

And I feel that if we can finally *really* have a discourse about race in this country, as the South Africans did for reconciliation, we will become healed. There will be a healing. The Kerner Commission recognized that, that we needed to really look at the problem of racism, discuss it, but the Kerner Commission was denied, and we fell back into the old ways of doing things. And until we can make that reconciliation, we will not be healed.

DC: What do you think it's going to take?

MW: It's going to take *acknowledging* it. We as the people who were oppressed, and those people who are the relatives and the generations of the oppressors, we are going to have to sit down together and really discuss this and acknowledge, *acknowledge* the pain, because I'm sure that there is pain on both sides. You cannot murder, you cannot mistreat, you cannot oppress, and not feel guilty. And guilt is very damaging, very damaging. And you cannot be treated that way without feeling anger. And anger is very damaging. And we can—we must come together and discuss this, the fear that they feel. There's so much fear of us, and we sense that. There's fear, there's guilt, and there's anger, and there is humility [1:15:00] and wanting and longing on both sides.

I have gone to films and I have seen people who have, who are the relatives of those who were oppressors mention that when they know their relatives, when they find out that their relatives were doing this, they couldn't walk out of their house for days they were so depressed. And they couldn't talk about it! You see?

DC: Yeah.

MW: There's nobody who would understand, nobody who's willing to listen. And we're going to have to, I think, come to this reconciliation if we are to become whole and not be so afraid that we have to wage wars, have soldiers everywhere.

JB: Well, [1:16:11] tremendous amount in South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Movement.

MW: Right.

JB: I mean, it set up a procedure for doing it and an expectation and had an acknowledgement that it's painful for all the parties.

MW: That's right. They did it in South Africa. They did it in Australia. But we cannot do it.

DC: And they tried it in Greensboro, North Carolina. I don't know if you followed that.

MW: Yes.

DC: Yeah, I mean, so there have been attempts.

MW: Been attempts. And I just hope we can. And, of course, I traveled and went to the Soviet Union on a Peace March.

DC: That's right, yeah. What was that—?

MW: And while we were there, every town that we went into—we walked from one place to Moscow, and every new place we went into, they'd bring out this huge round loaf of

bread and salt. And each person would break bread. And as we broke bread and ate, shared that bread, we broke barriers. And while I was there, I began to understand why we were not allowed to eat in restaurants and sit with families to eat: It breaks barriers! Breaking bread breaks barriers. And there, we broke the barriers and we did not remain strangers or "the other." We were able to really discuss and meet and get along.

DC: This very basic, very ancient level.

MW: Yes. And we talked about the need for peace and to do away with atomic bombs, nuclear weapons. And while I was there, I was given the Coretta Scott King Award for this book. And I sent a letter for acceptance, and my editor read it. And that letter said, "I had to make a choice. Would I go on this walk? Or would I stay and go to San Francisco and receive that honorable award?" And then I thought about the Coretta Scott King Award and what the children would think. And I thought they would appreciate it if I walked for peace rather than go. And I made the choice to walk for peace, rather than come to the acceptance.

DC: Um-hmm. So, maybe we can end with this question, then, connecting to that, you know, your work in the Movement, and then, we talked about reconciliation and peace. How do you, you know, connect all of these pieces?

MW: Well, I do feel [clears throat] that there can be no peace without justice. And all of the efforts that we made in the '60s, especially, and throughout our history—we didn't just start working for freedom [1:20:00] in the '60s, and it wasn't just Martin Luther King and Fannie Lou Hamer and Rosa Parks. It was a lot of young, energetic people and leaders who were killed and who were maimed and bombed and—you know?

So, I do feel that these people who can do this and really change are those who can *listen*, really know how to listen, and listen not thinking about what they are going to say against the

person who is talking, but *listen* and come to an understanding that we are all—we are all one, one, and that we must work together to bring peace, *peace*, to our own lives, to the lives of others, to this nation, to the world. And when we really know this, when we know it, we will *do* it. We will do it when we know it. And all the great thinkers have said that: When you know a thing, you will do it. Howard Thurman was one of those. Stress that: Know it and do it.

And I feel that is what has kept me with the faith to try to bring about a message that fits our time. All down the history, gospels have changed to fit the time and the need of the people. And we need that now.

DC: Um-hmm. It's ongoing. It's ongoing work.

MW: It's ongoing. Christianity is an ongoing—it's ongoing. It is not steady. It is not to be accepted or rejected. It is to be carried on to bring about and serve the needs of our time. And I think that—I wish I was twenty years younger. [Laughs]

DC: [Laughs]

MW: But I'm not. And I feel that my time is—

DC: Yeah.

MW: [Pause] Not there.

DC: Can I ask how old you are today?

MW: I'm ninety years old this past September. Ninety—September, October, November, December, January, February—and six months. Ninety years old and six months. So, you can see I don't have too much, all things being equal, all things being equal.

DC: Yeah, but—

JB: A few more books.

MW: [Laughs]

DC: Yeah, a few more books, right. I was going to say, by moving and fighting and—yeah.

MW: Yeah. I wish I could get a memoir published, but that's—it's hard now. They want stuff from celebrities.

DC: But you've done so much, and we're so grateful for sharing the story with us today.

MW: Well, I am so grateful for you to listen to my story. I am—I feel blessed and I feel honored.

DC: As do we, so thank you. Thank you. Any last thing you'd like to say before we wrap up? That was just beautiful, what you said.

MW: I would just like to acknowledge my children. I have two sons. I had—I had a son to pass away in 2008. He had worked very hard in the Black Studies department at Cal State, L.A., and he had done some books for young men. And I have—my younger son is living in Santa Monica, California, and he works for the City College there. [1:25:00] He did films. But I am very proud of my children. And my grandson, whose children you saw, has been very reliable, and he takes good care and sees to it that I'm okay.

DC: Um-hmm. Is this why you came back to California, to be close to family?

MW: That's why. That's why I came back. And he invited me, along with his wife, who you met, and his children. So, that—I feel blessed. Lots of friends and acquaintances.

Oh, there was one thing I didn't talk about. In 1970, I worked with a group of peoples of color, nurses, and we started that name, "people of color," rather than "minorities." We did work in the Schools of Nurses. At the time when we were doing this work to bring culture—we wanted to get them to know and appreciate the *cultures* of people of color, which would be helpful in making diagnoses. At that time, when they diagnosed shock, cyanosis, and

inflammation, they used red, white, and blue, and a lot of us died in shock, because we could not turn white, we could not turn red, we could not turn blue. And so, we worked on that.

DC: Hmm.

MW: And these nurses gave indications of how to determine that. And we also—at that time you could go to visit your people in the hospital between two and four, and we couldn't go because we were working.

DC: Right.

MW: And then, they had one set of—one menu—and a lot of the food that they gave, we didn't like. [Laughs] People of color—

DC: Yep.

MW: Didn't eat that kind of food. And there was another thing that we did, too. We had it so that during transition, at one time you couldn't bring children for the end of that period. Now, the whole family—we talked about how necessary that was for peoples of color. And now, anybody, everybody, during transition, they provide a room where you can go and be with that patient during that period. Asian people were suffering from dehydration because at one time they would just put ice water on the table and expect people to drink the ice water. They didn't drink ice water. There were so few nurses of Native American we couldn't get a statistic. And so, now, because of this, we added all of this into the textbooks for nurses and made all those changes and now we are very pleased that the term "peoples of color" is much more—

DC: In common usage, yeah.

MW: Common usage than "minorities."

DC: Yeah.

MW: Um-hmm. So, I did the culture of African Americans. I did the African American culture part.

DC: Part of that.

MW: For—consulted with the nurses and did that part.

DC: Yeah.

MW: Um-hmm, yeah.

DC: And that was in 1970?

MW: That was in the ’70s, um-hmm. The Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education sponsored that project, and [1:30:00] Dr. Marie Branch was the major nurse who headed this project. Um-hmm.

DC: Well, I’m glad you mentioned that. I’m glad—

MW: Oh, I am, too! Wow.

JB: That’s important.

DC: Yeah, very. Very important.

MW: Very important, very important. Um-hmm.

JB: I didn’t realize that was where the term came from.

DC: Yeah, I didn’t.

MW: Yes, yes. That was the—we thought “minority” is insulting. You are a “minority,” “less.” “Peoples of color” define us accurately. Um-hmm. Asians, African Americans, Chinese, Native Americans. We all worked together, um-hmm, on that project.

DC: Yeah.

MW: Um-hmm.

DC: Wonderful. Well, let me just thank you one more time.

MW: Oh, yes!

DC: And this was just such a treat for us and such an honor.

MW: Thank you. Well, I put out strawberries and grapes and cookies.

JB: Oh, thank you!

DC: [Laughs] Well, we will take advantage of your hospitality.

MW: Help yourself, help yourself.

DC: Thank you.

[Recording ends at 1:31:20]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council